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ABSTRACT

Kelley's cube model of attributions (1967) can be applied to moral judgments to predict how individuals arrive at attributions concerning dispositional or environmental causes. The relative contributions of the three dimensions of Kelley's cube to attributions of morality and trustworthiness were tested by presenting 37 male and 77 female subjects with consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus information regarding a stimulus person's conformity or nonconformity to one of four moral standards. Subjects then indicated the morality of the stimulus person and how certain they were he would conform to the particular standard under consideration in the future. Results indicate that distinctiveness and consistency information interact in such a way that distinctiveness information is more important in making attributions to general morality while consistency information contributes most to predictions of future conformity to a particular moral norm. Subjects' failure to use consensus information suggests that normative data is underutilized in attributing dispositional characteristics. (Author/NRB)

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THE ATTRIBUTION CUBE AND JUDGMENTS OF MORALITY

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The Attribution Cube and Judgments of Morality

1. Problem

An attributional approach to moral judgments argues observers attempt to understand moral actions by locating the cause of the morally evaluable behavior. While research such as Hartshorne and May's Studies in the Nature of Character (1928) may have convinced psychologists that morally commendable or reprehensible behavior is more a function of the situation rather than the "moral character" of the individual, the "naive" attributor may nonetheless invoke dispositional explanations for such behavior (cf. Jones & Nisbett, 1971). As with many types of attributional activities, the attributor's primary goal involves determining when moral behavior is evidence of situational constraint or inner moral purity, and when immoral behavior results from environmental necessity or an essentially unscrupulous nature.

Given the link between moral judgment and other attributional activities, Kelley (1971a) suggests that those factors which influence reality evaluation and achievement evaluations will also significantly determine moral evaluations. For example, Kelley's cube model of attributions (1967, 1971b) can be applied to moral judgments to predict how individuals,

through the use of multiple observations of another's behavior, arrive at attributions concerning dispositional or environmental causes. The three dimensions of the cube correspond to the three types of information available to the observer, and include (1) consensus information - the probability that others would behave in the same manner in which the actor under consideration behaved; (2) consistency information - the consistency (or lack of consistency) of the individual's reaction to a particular entity over time and modality; and (3) distinctiveness information - the individual's similarity (or dissimilarity) of response to other relevant entities.

The cube model, when applied to moral evaluation, suggests that distinctiveness information and consistency across time information will have a dramatic impact on attributions. Take, for example, a situation in which a person tells a lie. If the attributor believes this to be a highly distinctive behavior (i.e., the individual has lied on this occasion, but does not usually steal, cheat, or break a promise) and inconsistent with past behavior (i.e., the individual usually tells the truth), then the liar may not be as strongly condemned as the liar whose actions lack distinctiveness but possess high consistency. On the other hand, the individuals who tell the truth may still be morally condemned if this behavior is distinctive (they have told the truth, but usually steal, cheat, and break promises) and

inconsistent with past behavior. Thus, the model predicts an interaction of distinctiveness, consistency over time, and conformity to moral standard. When the action conflicts with a standard, then the actor will be most negatively evaluated when distinctiveness is low and consistency across time is high; evaluations will be most positive when distinctiveness is high and consistency across time is low. When the action conforms to a standard, the reverse pattern of results should be obtained. Lastly, it was predicted that consensus information would be considered relatively uninformative since social norms should override considerations of whether or not most people would have acted morally or immorally.

2. Method

In order to evaluate the relative contribution of each dimension, 37 males and 77 females evaluated the morality of eight stimulus persons who conformed and eight individuals who did not conform to one of four moral standards (tell truth, do duty, don't steal, keep promise). Accompanying the description of the individual's conforming or nonconforming behavior was information concerning consensus (what most others would have done), distinctiveness (how the individual acts in regard to other moral standards), and consistency (what the individual has done in the past). Thus, each subject read 16 brief scenarios which manipulated conformity, consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus information. For example, the nonconforming, high consensus, low distinctiveness, high

consistency over time story read X broke a promise. I believe that most people, in the same situation, would have broken their promise too. However, in other ways X acts immorally. For example, X fails to do duties, steals, and lies. Also, X has broken promises in the past.

After reading a story, observers were instructed to indicate the morality of X on a 9-point scale ranging from "moral" or "immoral" and to indicate how certain they were X would conform to the particular standard under consideration in the future (again using a 9-point scale).

3. Results

A 2 X 4 X 2 X 2 X 2 mixed least squares analysis of variance which treated sex of respondent (male, female) and standard (truth, duty, not steal, promise) as between subjects factors and conformity (conformed or conflicted with standard), consistency across time (high vs. low) consensus (high vs. low) and distinctiveness (high vs. low) as within subjects variables yielded support for the predictions. The means for the significant triple-interaction of conformity, distinctiveness, and consistency over time, F (1, 106) = 11.28, $p < .001$, are presented in the table. Supporting the hypotheses based on the cube model, when behavior conflicted with a moral standard evaluations were most negative when distinctiveness was low and consistency over time was high; evaluations were most positive when, on the other hand, distinctiveness was high and consistency over time was low. The

order of these differences was reversed, as predicted, when the behavior conformed to a moral standard. Judgments of certainty supported these findings. Also, the consensus information failed to contribute to attributions of morality or to the degree of certainty for estimating future behavior towards the standard.

4. Implications

The present results support the assumption that the types of information represented by the cube model are used for different types of attributions (to a general category characteristic or to future behavior predictions) and provides evidence for the notion that each type of information may differentially contribute to these uses. In sum, Jones and Nisbett's picture of the observer who seeks dispositional explanations of behavior seems well suited to the moral sphere - whether the transgressor is simply called immoral, morally bankrupt, or unscrupulous, the emphasis remains the same - morality, like many other dispositional characteristics, is generally understood to be a characteristic of individuals rather than situations.

5. References

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6. Table: The Impact of Consistency, Distinctiveness, and Standard Conformity on Judgments of Morality

	High Distinctiveness		Low Distinctiveness	
Conformity	Low Consistency	High Consistency	Low Consistency	High Consistency
Conformed to standard	6.6[b]	5.8[c]	4.2[e]	2.6[g]
Conformed with standard	3.7[f]	4.7[d]	6.4[b]	7.3[a]

Note. Means without a single common superscript differ at the $p < .05$ level. The higher the mean, the more immoral.